FRANZ ROH

Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism

Editors' Note

Writing in German in 1925 to champion a new direction in painting, Franz Roh originates the term Magic Realism to characterize this new painting's return to Realism after Expressionism's more abstract style. With the term, Roh praises Post-Expressionism's realistic, figural representation, a critical move that contrasts with our contemporary use of the term to signal the contrary tendency, that is, a text's *departure* from realism rather than its reengagement of it. According to Roh, the "convulsive life" and "fiery exaltation" of Expressionism have yielded to the representation of vigorous life in a "civil, metallic, restrained" manner. He describes the ways in which the Post-Expressionist painting of the 1920s returns to a renewed delight in real objects even as it integrates the formal innovations and spiritual thrust of Expressionism, which had shown "an exaggerated preference for fantastic, extraterrestrial, remote objects." In his statement in the preface to his book, "with the word 'magic,' as opposed to 'mystic,' I wished to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it," he anticipates the practice of contemporary magical realists.

Roh's 1925 essay was translated into Spanish and published by José Ortega y Gasset's influential *Revista de Occidente* in Madrid in 1927; it was also published in Spanish in expanded form as a book in the same year.[1] We provide a translation of the widely circulated *Revista de Occidente* article here. The actual influence of Roh's art-historical argument on the literary practice of magical realism is taken up by Irene Guenther in the essay following Roh's.

I attribute no special value to the title "magical realism." Since the work had to have a name that meant something, and the word "Post-Expressionism" only in-

dicates ancestry and chronological relationship, I added the first title quite a long time after having written this work. It seems to me, at least, more appropriate than "Ideal Realism" or "Verism," or "Neoclassicism," which only designate an aspect of the movement. "Superrealism" means, at this time, something else. With the word "magic," as opposed to "mystic," I wish to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it (as will become clear in what follows).—Frauenkirch, Davos, March 1925.[2]

The New Objects

The phases of all art can be distinguished quite simply by means of the particular *objects* that artists perceive, among all the objects in the world, thanks to an act of selection that is already an act of creation. One might attempt a history of art that would list the favorite *themes* of each era without omitting those whose absence would be equally meaningful. Of course, this would only give us the foundations for a system of characteristics; nevertheless, it would constitute the elementary, indeed the only fruitful, groundwork for wider research. There is, however, a second path open to research on objects. That other way, which transcends the thematic statistics I have just mentioned, would strive to determine, for example, whether an era notoriously fond of painting the heads of old people chose to paint old people as withered or lymphatic. None of this research concerns form. Only later begins the formal operation that reworks preceding layers. In the same way, in reverse fashion, particular objects can have an obscure and inexplicable influence over particular methods of painting. But that would catapult us into an unknown realm of historico-artistic research.

We will indicate here, in a cursory way, the point at which the new painting separates itself from Expressionism *by means of its objects*. Immediately we find that in its reaction to Impressionism, Expressionism shows an exaggerated preference for fantastic, extraterrestrial, remote objects. Naturally, it also resorts to the everyday and the commonplace for the purpose of distancing it, investing it with a shocking exoticism. Many religious themes suddenly appeared in our country, which had been so secular until then; the ultimate religious symbols (which the church rarely modifies) were employed with sudden daring. If a picture portrayed a city, for example, it resembled the destruction produced by volcanic lava and not just a play of forms or the booty of an agitated cubism. If the theme was erotic, it often degenerated into savage sensuality. If devilish men were depicted, they had the faces of cannibals. If animals appeared, they were horses of a

heavenly blue or red cows that, even in their objective reality, had to carry us beyond what we could experience on earth. If a painter wanted to sing the exuberance of southern provinces in a landscape, he came up with the tropics of an extraterrestrial world where men of our race burned like piles of paper under dry flames of color. But above all (as in Chagall's work) animals walked in the sky; behind the transparent brain of the viewer, also present in the picture, appeared towns and villages; overly vehement and heated heads popped like corks from overflowing bottles; grandiose chromatic storms flared through all these beings; and the farthest reaches of the pictures appeared mysteriously close to the foregrounds.

The Expressionist serials and reviews were called *The Last Judgment, Fire, Storm, Dawn.* These titles are enough to reveal the world of objects favored at that time.

But let us glance at the pictures reproduced at the end of this book.[3] It seems to us that this fantastic dreamscape has completely vanished and that our real world re-emerges before our eyes, bathed in the clarity of a new day. We recognize this world, although now—not only because we have emerged from a dream—we look on it with new eyes. The religious and transcendental themes have largely disappeared in recent painting. In contrast, we are offered a new style that is thoroughly of this world, that celebrates the mundane. Instead of the mother of God, the purity of a shepherdess in the fields (Schrimpf). Instead of the remote horrors of hell, the inextinguishable horrors of our own time (Grosz and Dix). It feels as if that roughshod and frenetic transcendentalism, that devilish detour, that flight from the world have died and now an insatiable love for terrestrial things and a delight in their fragmented and limited nature has reawakened. One could say that once again a profound calm and thoughtfulness prevails, a calm that is perhaps a prelude to a new flight, launched with a more mature knowledge and earthly substance. Humanity seems destined to oscillate forever between devotion to the world of dreams and adherence to the world of reality. And really, if this breathing rhythm of history were to cease, it might signal the death of the spirit.

Reactionaries believe unequivocally that with the new art such a moment has arrived. But considered carefully, this new world of objects is still alien to the current idea of Realism. How it stupefies the rearguard and seems to them almost as inappropriate as Expressionism itself! How it employs various techniques inherited from the previous period, techniques that endow all things with a deeper meaning and reveal mysteries

that always threaten the secure tranquility of simple and ingenuous things: excessively large bodies, lying with the weight of blocks on a skimpy lawn; objects that don't imitate the least movement but that end surprisingly real, strange mysterious designs that are nevertheless visible down to their smallest details!

All heads, hands, bodies, objects that express "convulsive life," "fiery exaltation"; in short, anything nervous has become suspect in this new art, for which nervousness represents *wasted* forces. Truly vigorous life is imagined to be civil, metallic, restrained. We don't need to describe in detail the kinds of men, women, children, animals, trees, and rocks that we produced in the past.

Finally, the new art does not belong to the series of initial artistic phases that includes Expressionism. It is a movement of decantation and clarification that was fortunate enough to find right at the start an almost exhausted artistic revolution that had begun to discover new avenues. In addition, these circumstances habitually express themselves in a more measured group of themes. Is this the way to reconcile art and the people (largely through the reestablishment of objectivity)? The future will tell. History, of course, always shows that the bottom layer of the population, which experiences the monotony of hard labor, is more easily touched by discrete and prudent works than by lofty and inspired ones. *Biedermeier* painting, whose serene grandeur, barely exhausted even now, was always threatened by vulgar bourgeoisification; it has forced us to see the danger that prudent art courts when it caters to contemporary taste.

Objectivity

Objectivity is not equally important in all the arts. Music does not reproduce objects; it creates out of nothing, given the fact that its phenomena do not really attempt to refer to nature. Architecture does not attempt that reference either. But during the development of Expressionism, painting, which has somehow almost always held on to nature, went as far as it could toward rejecting its representative, imitative meaning; specific objectivity was suspected of lacking spirituality; in Futurism, the objective world appeared in an abrupt and dislocated form. On the other hand, Post-Expressionism sought to reintegrate reality into the heart of visibility. The elemental happiness of seeing again, of recognizing things, reenters. Painting becomes once again the mirror of palpable exteriority. That is

the reason to speak of a New Realism without in any way alluding to the instinctive attitude that characterized previous Realisms in European art. The viewers who continue to prefer that attitude do not feel satisfied with this new "frigid, unanimated" Realism.

An example will explain what we mean by objectivity. When I see several apples on a table, I receive an extremely complex sensation (even without leaving the plane of aesthetic intuition). I am attracted not just by the breath of exquisite colors with which Impressionism entertained itself; not just by the varied designs of spherical, colored, and deformed shapes that captivated Expressionism. I am overcome by a much wider amalgam of colors, spatial forms, tactile representations, memories of smells and tastes; in short, a truly unending complex that we understand by the name of *thing*. Compared with Post-Expressionism's integrative attitude, Impressionism and Expressionism seem outmoded simplifications, limiting themselves now to fulgurations of chromatic surface, now to abstractions of stereometry and color; they steal the seductive integrity of objective phenomena from the viewer. But when painting returns to a full objectivity, all those relations and feelings that we do not find in pure harmonies of color and form reappear. It is clear that only after art had become abstract could feeling for the object, which had been dragged all over like a vague, vacuous and unsubstantial rag, flower again. Only then could the object again constitute a fundamental emotion and require a corresponding representation. After art has been spiritualized, objectivity once again becomes the most intense pleasure of painting.

We must admit that the world created like this in its most tangible reality offers us the fundamental artistic feeling of *existence* for the first time. But let us not forget (as we often have recently) that we can only become aware of the objective world if to these tactile impressions we add impressions of color and form, ordered according to a principle that is also valid for living. Of course the new art does not restore objectivity by using all sensory potential *in the same way:* what it principally evokes is a most prolific and detailed *tactile feeling*.

We may use the most varied circumstances to illustrate this idea. For Impressionism, that the world consisted of objects was an "obvious" fact not worth much attention; for the Impressionists, then, painting delighted in giving maximal value and meaning to chromatic texture, which floated in the air. Expressionism also considered the existence of objects to be patently "obvious" and looked for meaning in powerful and violent *formal*

rhythms; vessels into which man's spirit (that of either an artist or a man of action) could pour everything. But the most recent painting attempts to discover a more general and deeper basis, without which the two previous enthusiasms could not have succeeded. Before, people were not at all devoted to the object: they took the exterior world which art molds and shapes for granted. In making what was formerly accepted as obvious into a "problem" for the first time, we enter a much deeper realm, even though some of the results may seem inadequate to us. This calm admiration of the magic of being, of the discovery that things already have their own faces, means that the ground in which the most diverse ideas in the world can take root has been reconquered—albeit in new ways.

The new art has been maligned for its rough drawing and "penetrating" execution. This criticism does not take account of the possibility of feeling existence, of making it stand out from the void; that a solidly modeled figure crystalizes itself, as if by a miracle, emerging from the most obscure source. Here, perhaps, the background is the last frontier, absolute nothingness, absolute death, from which something emerges and vibrates with energetic intensity.

This seems to be a more important viewpoint than the "objectivity" everyone keeps evoking. The latter doesn't acknowledge that radiation of magic, that spirituality, that lugubrious quality throbbing in the best works of the new mode, along with their coldness and apparent sobriety.

The great abstract system of Expressionism had tended more or less toward mural painting, in which a free rhythm filled broad surfaces that would affect the spectator from afar. But with Post-Expressionism, easel painting, pictures with frames, easily transportable works that delighted many tastes besides those of postmedieval Europe are enjoying a renaissance. Now, when a piece of imitated "reality" hangs on the wall it only makes sense if it starts from and then (consciously or unconsciously) transcends the representation of a window, that is, if it constitutes a magical gaze opening onto a piece of mildly transfigured "reality" (produced artificially).

This idea of a picture on a wall is prospering and increasing in popularity again. The clash of true reality and apparent reality (of the actual room with the visionary realm of the painting) has always had an elemental attraction. This enchantment is enjoyed now in a new way. Such a juxtaposition of reality and appearance was not possible until the recuperation of the objective world, which was largely lacking in Expressionism. Ex-

pressionism appeared to have already rejected the image of real nature in favor of an exclusively spiritual world.

With this new movement painting distances itself from the Expressionists' rivalry with music. Already with Kandinsky, painting had felt obliged to take second place to music because music unfolded in time and consequently had great expanses at its command, whereas easel painting continued to be an art of simultaneity. Painting could only contain a few measures, as it were, that could be embraced by a glance in a short space of time—a space of time in which a consummate condensation could be achieved nonetheless. Such a condensation evokes in the viewer the desire and even the need to remain for a long time in front of this instantaneous vision enclosed in a few measures, whereas an art of successive time (like music, the novel, drama, film) never ceases to insert new figures. This was a disadvantage for painting; unlike music, in the majority of countries and periods painting compensated for this shortcoming by synthesizing its concerns: painting became not only a harmonious form of expression but also a representation of objects, something that music could never really be. Thus, painting makes use of keys that can open in the viewer all the exciting emotions that come only from representing the object. The Expressionist way of seeing, according to which the only "true artistic and spiritual" technique was composition, the placing and design of lines and colors but not the portrayal of objects, was impossible to maintain. That way of seeing forgets that the sphere, expressive in and of itself, made of pure forms and colors, embodies a completely different meaning when it refers to object A and changes entirely if the same combination of forms refers to object B. A very simple example: a harmony of color and form, applied to the heart of a cabbage, embodies a completely different meaning when it is applied to a female nude; because in the second instance, without even considering other factors, there emerges an erotic meaning that the cabbage can never assume. Imagine the innovations that such a wide-ranging and original combination immediately imply. Furthermore, as far as expression goes, the (positive) darkness of an abstract form means something completely different from the (positive) darkness of a given object.

The Futurism of Severini, Boccioni, and Carrà had already recognized this when (as I have said) in the midst of a general confusion of purely compositional strokes, objects suddenly emerged, created, like voices from another world, only to disappear immediately. Many people dismissed this as something of no consequence; but the truth is that it produced an effect

as stimulating as it was odd. So, just as with futurism, the miracle of *realistic depiction* appeared quickly in the midst of abstraction, only to lose itself again, so Post-Expressionism offers us the miracle of *existence in its imperturbable duration:* the unending miracle of eternally mobile and vibrating molecules. Out of that flux, that constant appearance and disappearance of material, permanent objects somehow appear: in short, the marvel by which a variable commotion crystallizes into a clear set of constants. This miracle of an apparent persistence and duration in the midst of a demoniacal flux; this enigma of total quietude in the midst of general becoming, of universal dissolution: this is what Post-Expressionism admires and highlights. For Expressionism, the deepest meaning, the reason it erects this world of permanent bodies as a symbol, lies in building something that by means of its very persistence resists eternal fluidity. Post-Expressionism faithfully raises a pane of glass in front of a light and is surprised that it doesn't "melt," that it doesn't inevitably transform itself, that it is accorded a brief stay in eternity. It is the same feeling that motivates the invocation of norms, of ethical and even political positions, from either the right or the left. And this is not a result of intimate inertia; it is the glimmer from which the *élan vital* (the previous generation's philosophy of life) cannot save us. So then, New Objectivity is something more than the simple respect for the objective world in which we are submerged. In addition, we see juxtaposed in harsh tension and contrast the forms of the spirit and the very solidity of objects, which the will must come up against if it wishes to make them enter its system of coordinates. The spirit cannot show itself in the open with such facility and speed as Expressionism thought it could; in the end, Expressionism aimed at disrupting the world as it existed in the structure of the Self, which in turn resisted such disruption. At least this is how New Realism, Ideal Realism, understands the Expressionist generation. It is true, says the New Realism, that Expressionism has broken with individualism in directing meditation toward the basic fundamentals of all human sensation; but it hasn't abandoned subjectivity (a collective subjectivity) at all, because the very consistency of the world has degenerated almost entirely into the special rhythms of the collective subject.

One could say of Cubism, as a basic comparison, that it painted what we might call pre-forms, primordial forms, categories of human perception, at the same time that it depicted perceived matter. Likewise, it can be said that without losing sight of its own modeling force (we are still dealing with the very definite means of composition that it employs) today's

art proposes to catch reality as such, instead of evading it with a sudden and inspired stroke. This new art is situated resolutely between extremes, between vague sensuality and highly structured schematics, as true philosophy may be located between ingenuous realism and exalted idealism.

In order to clarify the situation of this art in relation to the world of objects, we can compare it not only to the kind of man who contemplates and knows but also to a new kind of man of *action.* The end of the nineteenth century, including Impressionism, gave many men a new capacity for enjoyment, a new sense of smell and even a new knowledge of *existing* reality. The Expressionist generation rightly contrasted such men with another kind of man who imposes ethical norms, who constructs the future according to preconceived plans, a utopian who scorns mere knowledge of past life, a nobler and more audacious kind of man who truly moves the world and who—even indirectly—has always pushed it decisively in the direction of its evolution. The most recent art corresponds, however, to a third class of man who, without losing anything of his constructivist ideals, nonetheless knows how to reconcile that desire with a greater respect for reality, with a closer knowledge of what exists, of the objects he transforms and exalts. This kind of man is neither the "empirical" Machiavellian politician nor the apolitical man who listens only to the voice of an ethical ideal, but a man at once political *and* ethical, in whom both characteristics are equally prominent. The new position, if it survives, will exist on a middle ground not through weakness but, on the contrary, through energy and an awareness of its strength. It will be a sharp edge, a narrow ledge between two chasms on the right and the left.

The Proximity of the Object as Spiritual Creation

Painting now seems to feel the reality of the object and of space, not like copies of nature but like another creation. We have already seen that Expressionism in its last stages was very enamored of the "spiritual." This recent painting could not, then, fall back into amorphous sensuality, although here and there it does court that danger. It manifests its interior point of departure more purely than does nineteenth-century Realism, revealing its compositional structure with a different kind of clarity. It continues to approach the ultimate enigmas and harmonies of existence through a hidden stereometry. It also believes that Being consists of fundamentally simple forms and that in the best modern works these forms

are metallic and quiescent. The new idea of "realistic depiction" as it is rigorously conceived wishes to make such forms concretely evident in nature rather than in the abstract. To depict realistically is not to portray or copy but rather to build rigorously, to construct objects that exist in the world in their particular primordial shape. The old Aristotelian idea of imitation had already gained a spiritual quality. For the new art, it is a question of representing before our eyes, in an intuitive way, *the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world.* This mattered very little to Expressionism.

The point is not to discover the spirit beginning with objects but, on the contrary, to discover objects beginning with the spirit; for that reason, one accords consummate value to the process in which spiritual form remains large, pure, and clear. This second objective world thereby rigorously resembles the first, the existing world, but it is a purified world, a referential world. We have already seen that we cannot leap out of the existing world and jump into the free spaces of pure spirit, as Expressionism often tried to do. Post-Expressionism, in holding to existing exteriority, wants to say clearly that we have to shape the world we find in front of us.

This is how we must understand what today's historical situation shows us so extraordinarily well: that the invention and re-establishment of the object can reveal to us the idea of creation. It is well known that the nineteenth century rarely attempted anything other than extrinsic imitation, and hence it had to remain seated in front of nature or works of art or plaster casts, limiting itself in the end to copying the object before its eyes. When, in violent reaction to this, Expressionism had crystallized the object's exclusively *internal* aspect, the unusual opportunity of looking at *the object close up* from the other side had arrived; in other words, the opportunity of reconstructing the object, starting exclusively from our interiority. Thus, returning to the previous example of the apples, today we could say that the fantastic apples of Expressionism may belong to a better world because it is simpler and more circumscribed, but that they lack true existence. Speaking in moral terms, we could almost say that the Expressionist ideal has not been realized because of the tragic fact that creating the best always means a compromise with what already exists.

The way in which the restorative process of this new painting operates here is quite clear. A painter like Schrimpf, who attempts to create the exterior world with the utmost precision, considers it very important not to paint outdoors, not to use a model, to have everything flow from the interior image to the canvas. That is why he paints his landscapes in

his studio, almost always without a model or even a sketch. Nevertheless, he repeatedly insists that the landscape be definitively, rigorously, a *real* landscape that could be confused with an existing one. He wants it to be "real," to impress us as something ordinary and familiar and, nevertheless, to be magic by virtue of that isolation in the room: even the last little blade of grass can *refer to* the spirit. That is the painter's aim—of course, he doesn't always achieve it. Only when the creative process achieves its goal from the inside out can it generate new views of reality, which is at most built in pieces, never imitated as a whole.

The opposite side of this double-sided art that struggles between opposites appears in the painting of Kanoldt, for example, who builds his landscapes out of Italian cities because he feels certain of their spiritual content, working whenever possible in nature, outside. Thus he accentuates and intensifies the power of the object.

As long as Post-Expressionism works with this dialectic, it will be open to a thousand spiritual possibilities. But if it degenerates into a simple external imitation (as can easily happen in this difficult attempt at objectification), it will become less significant and painting will find itself trampled to death by those marvelous machines (photography and film) that imitate reality so incomparably well.

The New Space

As we have previously suggested, the partisans of nineteenth-century sensuous Realism reject the new painting's Realism as schematic, intellectual, constructed, inert, frigid. In fact, what happens is that the *feeling of space* has changed. To understand that change, we will compare the latest styles of landscape painting. The Impressionists represented space from the perspective of air, of vaporous atmosphere: that is, they gasified and shattered color on the intervening atmosphere. But in attempting to create a shimmering colored vapor to fill the whole picture, and in conceiving of the whole world as a chromatic veil, what Impressionism actually achieved was a flattening of space. Matter visualized in form and color was caught as in a gaseous substance on the picture plane. It was impossible to say whether this matter was projected by an object situated *behind* the intervening surface or by an object *in front of* this projection screen. Thus, in the age of Impressionism people talked a great deal about the value of the *visual plane*, so much did its theory owe to a contemporaneous

current of classicism (Fiedler, Hildebrand). But after Expressionism the demands of the surface decreased. The desire for spatiality re-emerged, bringing with it a certain ambiguity. Painters felt depth to be primary and placed everything obliquely to emphasize the force of foreshortening. The canvas, which was made to reveal extended surface qualities in both Impressionism and Impressionist classicism (Hildebrand did not understand sculpture except as a continuation of bas relief, a conception in which he was basically wrong), was deepened, hollowed out, and filled with depressions and elevations. But it was always a matter of adjacent spaces that invaded and assaulted the foreground. Furthermore, all the foreshortened figures appeared to move forward rather than backward (something that could have happened in the middle- and backgrounds as well). However, every foreshortened figure could be given a different trajectory. From that principle the rough and often ferocious aggressivity of purely Expressionist paintings emerged.

In adopting a classical position again, the most recent painting conciliates and synthesizes the decisive elements of these three possibilities that have appeared in the history of art. The best new landscapes reveal a constant surface, to which is added a certain forward thrust (in this case as if the painter were "displaying" the shape for us), but they also make use of distance. Thus in the same way that (as we will see shortly) the delight in the juxtaposition of small and large is felt again, so another polarity and juxtaposition is also reestablished: I refer to the juxtaposition of the far and the near, which in the new painting are reconciled and face each other. This meeting is now asserted more purely and not, as in Impressionism, through intermediate veils and vaporizing, dissolving, conciliating atmospheres. It could be said that the new landscapes, like the landscapes of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, move vigorously forward, at the same time that they recede into the far distance. In Post-Expressionism the bird's-eye view, which Expressionism reapplied but which Impressionism prohibited because it sacrificed the flatness of the picture plane, embodies that double meaning. They must have sensed at some point—so the Expressionists proudly declared of their landscapes—how to penetrate deeply into the distance, how to "really" enter into the picture. These words manifest the exalted feeling of reality that makes the picture a suggestive spatial unity, whose floor invites footsteps. These landscapes on the wall no longer try (as those by Marees did) to spring from surface force, from the continuous feeling of the wall, as we have said elsewhere.

Art tries over and over again to picture the whole volume of space, making it felt through its division into three dimensions. While the Gothic (including painting) expresses extension primarily as an upward thrust, the Renaissance deliberately extends volume horizontally in order to savor it fully. In contrast, as is well known, the Baroque attempts to throw it all into the vortex of depth. With a charm that goes unrecognized today, the best fifteenth-century painting establishes a calm juxtaposition between breadth of surface and depth of field. This juxtaposition produces a magnificent intensity that contrasts, on the one hand, with the era of Raphael and Titian, and, on the other, with the nineteenth century (at least during its second half), where we find only the rigors of surface with no compensating factors. Today we see a renewed sensitivity to the dynamics of depth and direction, a sensitivity that is a distinguishing feature of Post-Expressionism.

Recall, finally, that in both its horizontal extensions and its elevations, Expressionism searches for a secret geometry. That is why we can say that (to the advantage of the new painting) Expressionism has still not disappeared.

Smaller than Natural (Miniature)

The rigorous dedication to the object functions in very different ways in the most recent art, but it almost always manifests itself in miniature form. It seeks to endow the viewer, who is frequently too cursory and careless in his knowledge of the world and in his idealism, with a penetrating and meticulous lucidity.

By miniature we mean a fine and exact painting, executed on a very small surface; a painting whose decisive character typically comes from its minimal exterior dimensions. Though it is true that the narrowness of the surface compels all representation to search for smallness from within, this is no more than the extrinsic and superficial concept of miniature. The *intrinsic* miniature (which can encompass also very large paintings, a typical example of which is Altdorfer's *Battle of Alexander*) is art produced by attempting to locate *infinity* in small things. This is the idea of the miniature that takes its inspiration from a *special way of intuiting the world* and, as such, can apply to all the arts, even music. Its opposite pole is another feeling for life, which animates monumental art, an idea that applies equally to all the arts. This idea of monumentality is not limited

to external dimensions either. Thus, for example, *The Lacemaker* by Vermeer is a little painting the size of a plate that nevertheless produces the impression of a poster the size of a house. The miniature and the monument are two poles situated beyond the development of styles, at a distance from known spiritual models. For this reason they must be investigated on their own terms. Vermeer has painted a small object, the bust of a woman, and Altdorfer, in contrast, a gigantic battlefield with a panoramic view of the mountains. In order to understand the aesthetic means used here, it is not enough to say that the "monumental" painter seeks the foreground while the other represents distances with his small shapes. It is more important to notice that the "monumental" man piles up shapes in large groups while the "microscopic" one establishes the largest possible number of subdivisions. When the latter does not have a multipartite object in front of him, like thickets of leaves or fibers of grass or human masses spread out over the horizon, then he carves, separates, and divides the foreground. (The painting by Vermeer I mentioned above can be sketched perfectly well by accenting the small parts, without objects branching off into space in the way we see them, for example, in the well-known reproduction by Unger, who altered Vermeer's formal continuity, converting it into the prolixity of the nineteenth century.)

The spiritual type of painting that seeks what is powerful becomes caricature by virtue of its emphatic presentation and its statuesque turgidity. The other type, which cultivates the profound meaning of the diminutive, usually plunges us into tedious minutia that scatter and confuse our attention. In the best periods, both possibilities almost always coincide, which is what happened in the late Gothic period, even at the point when it was already becoming the Renaissance. (One of the most timeless examples is Dürer, especially in his copper engravings.) Expressionism tended exclusively toward the monumental; Post-Expressionism again becomes the triumphal synthesis of both tendencies. However, the tension between the two possibilities should never be suppressed. In this way Post-Expressionism avoids (consciously or unconsciously) any central "organic" line that would divide these modes of representation; on the contrary, it tends to weave them together. Thus in wide compositions we find the world of smallness ensconced at regular intervals, so to speak. At other times the hostility of the two opposing tendencies remains. Schrimpf insolently knocks large bodies down on the smallness of grass, thereby juxtaposing its diminutive fibers with the vigor of the human form. Or again, a painter

may enjoy positioning a powerfully foregrounded *near* shape in front of dimunitive details in the *distance,* as the southern Italians of the quattrocento liked to do, when the minutiae of the late Gothic coexisted genially with the massed volumes of the Renaissance.

The extent to which the miniature can express maximum power *all by itself* can be explained by thinking of the greatest spectacle that nature offers us, a sight that contains the smallest units, almost simple points placed on the prodigious surface width of the picture: *the spectacle of the starry sky, through which we experience infinity.*

The desire for precision and refinement motivated both the Constructivists and their sworn enemies the Verists. So that even when the theme is abstract (as in Léger, Feininger, Schlemmer), we see a sharper, more minute, cleaner structure than in the first five years of Expressionism. We must distinguish this phenomenon from Post-Expressionism's tendency—which I described earlier—to reappropriate the real world in painting. We could say that in this new painting the very system of categories has been refined, gaining in clarity, richness, and precision.

Two types of miniatures take on completely contradictory meanings in the different styles of Expressionism, a phenomenon that we need to note here, although we will reserve the study of these different styles for later. In Grosz and Dix this miniaturism tries to present the *horrible side* of the world in the crudest manner and in all its minute detail, but still without any political overtones. Later comes the political meaning, and it attempts to give us a microscopic image of social ills, to put them under the very noses of the bourgeoisie, who usually refuse to look at such disagreeable sights. In contrast, Schrimpf and Spiess celebrate the intimacy of everyday life with precise fidelity; they conceive of the world as a handful of grass, an anthill, and wish once again to evoke the long-forgotten and exquisite quality of the diminutive in art.

In addition, an erroneous judgment has been hanging over all this, namely that in representing small things one necessarily falls into spiritual pettiness. I have already mentioned Altdorfer's *Battle of Alexander.* Divided into a thousand little pieces, it is something final and definitive, in exactly the same way as *The Last Judgment* conceived on a large scale by Rubens or Michelangelo. In science the same thing applies: the planetary microcosm of the atom is a mystery in the end, no less than the macrocosm of astronomy. Now then, both kinds of miniaturist painting (the one that reconciles us to the world, and the one that tries to horrify us)

imply an orientation toward the infinity of small things, of the microcosm. One must, therefore, be very careful not to apply the criteria of Impressionism and Expressionism automatically and, basing ourselves on their fluctuating and monumental characters, deprecate this faithful devotion to small things, this "nitpicking," as Dürer put it. This "nitpicking" is, in fact, like the slow steps of a magnificent parade and reveals a profound new meaning.

The most recent painting coincides with Expressionism in painting pictures of vast scope. But while Expressionism was entirely consumed with this effort, Postexpressionist paintings open the way to meticulous expression. *Now* is when we really draw near to the painting of the late Middle Ages, often allegedly without a motif, from which Expressionism took the geometric plan of large scale composition. On entering the church, the ensemble of an altar painting unfolded its essential meaning at a hundred paces, and then, as the distance diminished, revealed little by little the new world of the very small in successive planes of details, details that were symbolic of all true *spiritual* knowledge of the world because they always remained subordinate to the total structure. Thus the viewer could satiate himself with minutiae, with the thickness and density of all cosmic relationships. Perhaps many Postexpressionist pictures offer the appearance of something slow and laborious at first sight; but eventually, after we have absorbed them, they offer us secret delights and intimate charms that the pure unifying idealism of abstract art never even imagined. Impressionism and Expressionism aspired to an exciting, surprising, suggestive art that with their vast grids aimed at stimulating man's fantasy, his personal associations, and his creations. But the latest painting wants to offer us the image of something totally finished and complete, minutely formed, opposing it to our eternally fragmented and ragged lives as an archetype of integral structuring, down to the smallest details. Someday man too will be able to recreate himself in the perfection of this idea.

Translated by Wendy B. Faris

Translator's Notes

1 Roh's original work is *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei* (Leipzig, Klinkhardt and Biermann, 1925). Roh takes up the issue of definition again in a later article, "Ruckblick auf den Magischen Realismus," in *Das Kunstwerk* 6, 1 (1952): 7–9. In Spanish the

book is Franz Roh, *Realismo mágico, post expresionismo: Problemas de la pintura europea más reciente,* trans. (from the German) Fernando Vela (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1927); the article is "Realismo mágico: Problemas de la pintura europea más reciente," trans. Fernando Vela, *Revista de Occidente* 16 (April, May, June 1927): 274–301. This translation is from the Spanish. I have consistently capitalized the term Magic Realism in accordance with art historical usage.

2 Preface to the book cited above, from which this essay is excerpted.

3 At the end of the book from which this essay is excerpted are a series of about ninety reproductions of paintings. The first several pages consist of comparative pairings illustrating the contrast between Expressionism and Magic Realism. Kandinsky is juxtaposed with Carrà, Delaunay with de Chirico and Citroen, Metzinger with Schrimpf, and Schmidt-Rottluf with Mense. Other painters whom Roh includes in the group of new Magic Realists are Schottz, Spies, Borje, Herbin, Miró, Nebel, Huber, Grosz, Dix, Picasso, Davringhausen, Galanis, etc.